INTRODUCTION

The Ethnic Studies Oral History Project, established in January 1976, was created to record and preserve interviews with individuals who have recollections of events and personalities that would be of value to the community, teachers, students, historians, and researchers.

Special effort is made to record history told by the working men and women of all ethnic groups who made Hawaii's land productive, who overcame differences between ethnic groups, and whose efforts to better the quality of life were realized through struggle and hard work.

The communities of Waialua and Haleiwa were the focus of the first Ethnic Studies oral history project. Life stories of nine native Hawaiians was the second project. Former residents of the Kakaako community were interviewed in the third project. This project, taro farming in Waipio Valley, is the fourth.

Brief History of Waipio Valley

Waipio Valley is the first of five large valleys located on the Big Island's northeastern coast. It is at the end of the road which runs through Honokaa and Kukuihaele towns. A jeep road winds down into the valley from the Lookout point. Its steep cliffs range from 1,000 to 3,000 feet in height. The valley mouth is approximately 1/2-mile wide; the valley floor curves inland for about eight miles. Water from five tributary valleys feeds into Waipio: Hiilawe, Waima, Koiawe, Alakahi, and Kawainui.

At the time of Captain Cook's arrival in Hawaii, Waipio's population was estimated at 4,000. By 1823 the population had declined to 1,325, according to missionary William Ellis. Father Bond of Kohala estimated the population to be only 640 by 1858; and by 1881, when Charles R. Bishop bought most of Waipio's arable land, there were only 150 people.

In the 1880's Waipio had an influx of Chinese immigrants who had finished their contracts with the nearby sugar plantations in Kukuihaele and Honokaa and were looking for other work. They inter-married with the Hawaiians and began growing rice commercially. Later, Japanese and Filipino immigrants also moved off the plantations and into Waipio.

Interviewees say that there were several hundred residents of all ethnic groups in the 1920's and 1930's. In the 1940's three events precipitated an exodus from the valley: a serious flood in 1941, the closing of the grammar school in 1945, and the 1946 tidal wave. In addition, people left the valley in search of the greater educational and job opportunities and the modern conveniences that the towns and cities offered. By the 1950's and 1960's very few people lived in Waipio.

ESOHP staff counted 64 full time residents (including 12 children) and 10 part-time residents as of June 1978. Seven of the adults are women. Only about 12 of the 64 are old-timers; the rest are young haoles who have moved in since 1970.

Project Description

Taro (Colocasia esculenta), or kalo as the Hawaiians called it, is an integral part of the history of Waipio. In pre-Captain Cook times taro played a vital role in Hawaiian culture. Not only was it the Hawaiians' staple food, but it also was the source of many myths, including one about the creation of mankind.

Life revolved around taro production. It strongly influenced every sphere of an individual's life, from his social relationships to the laws he lived by. The labor requirements of growing taro determined people's daily activities. Strict rules regulated the natural and man-made water system used for taro irrigation. Rituals surrounded the building of a new ditch. War was prohibited during the harvest season. E. S. Craighill Handy states that "nowhere else (in Polynesia) was it (growing taro) a systematic and engrossing occupation to the extent that it was in Hawaii."

Waipio Valley has been continuously farmed in taro at least since the 1500's. Long ago, before Cook's time, approximately three square miles (1,920 acres) of the valley's land produced taro. It is not known whether all that taro was consumed by valley residents. There is evidence that by the 1850's some taro was shipped out of the valley. Over time fewer Hawaiians and more Orientals farmed taro.

In 1900, 1,300 acres of taro were being farmed in Hawaii. By 1948, acreage dropped to 1,010. Today, taro is no longer a major food staple and only 500 acres are cultivated statewide, producing approximately seven million pounds of taro a year.

Approximately 100 to 125 acres are devoted to taro production in Waipio today. The 50 or so mostly part-time farmers either lease land or sharecrop. They commute from their homes in Kukuihaele and Honokaa. In 1973, they pulled about three million pounds of taro. Then they were hit by a serious rot problem which seemed impossible to solve and destroyed up to 90 percent of their crop. In 1977, production was down to 1,700,000 pounds. Taro production in Waipio and throughout the State is declining.

This project examines, through oral history, the socio-economic aspects of taro farming now and in the more recent past (1925-1978) in Waipio Valley. Although information on the taro growing process was sought, the primary aim of this project was to get information on the social relationships among the farmers, residents, and processors and the economic factors involved in farming taro. This also included how decisions that affect taro production are made, and what it was like

growing up, living, and working in a large taro-producing valley. Additionally, information was sought on why the taro industry is declining and yet why some farmers still grow taro, and what the place of taro in valley residents' lives is.

Among the topics covered in this study are:

- family backgrounds and life-stories.
- the evolution of the Waipio community since 1925--demographically, physically, character-wise.
- the changes in taro growing methods over the years.
- the economic ups and downs of raising taro for a living; the uncertainties of the market and nature.
- the farmers' day to day and seasonal activities relating to taro growing and marketing.
- the future of taro in Waipio and Hawaii.
- how the farmers learned what they know and who they learned from.
- why the farmers raise taro today.
- the problems of raising taro in the past and today.
- the role of the Waipio Taro Growers Association in the farmers' lives.
- young people's attitudes toward farming taro and living in Waipio and Kukuihaele

Methodology

Before interviewing began, background research was done in the State Archives and the University of Hawaii Hamilton Library. An advisory committee composed of Bryan Begley, UH Agricultural Economics Department Research Associate; Beatrice Krauss, Lyon Arboretum researcher; Charles Reppun, Waiahole taro farmer; and Steve Boggs, UH Anthropology professor provided more research materials and feedback on the project's direction. Upon completion of background research, a chronology and guideline questionnaire were developed.

Yukie Yoshinaga-Salmoiraghi, a Hilo resident and co-author of the pamphlet, "Waipio" was hired as an interview consultant/assistant. Her knowledge of the valley's history, and her extensive personal contacts in Waipio and Kukuihaele provided invaluable assistance to the project.

ESOHP Research Associate Vivien Lee made five trips to the Big Island between January and June 1978. Thirty-one men and ten women were interviewed; three of the interviewees live on Oahu. Forty-five interviews were taped for a total of 63-3/4 hours. Three interviews were unrecorded and are summarized in note form. Most of the interviewees are old-timers: farmers, valley residents and ex-residents. Several interviews were conducted with young people, locals and haoles, who either farm or live in Waipio. Three poi processors, one Oahu taro farmer and the keeper of the Lyon Arboretum taro collection were also interviewed.

Taro-Terminology

Some knowledge of the taro plant and its cultivation and marketing practices is necessary for understanding the transcripts.

Taro is:

> "...a kind of aroid cultivated since ancient times for food, spreading widely from the tropics of the Old World. In Hawaii, taro has been the staple from earliest times to the present, and here its culture developed greatly, including more than 300 forms. All parts of the plant are eaten, it's starchy root principally as poi, and its leaves as luau. It is a perennial herb consisting of a cluster of long-stemmed, heart shaped leaves rising a foot or more from underground tubers or corms."
>
> (Pukui and Elbert, Hawaiian Dictionary)

"Huli" is the same thing as "seed." "Cut seed," "cut huli," and "make huli," all refer to the process of cutting off the corm and leaves to get the huli which is used for re-planting.

"Luau" refers to the leaves. The "ha" or "haha" is the stem of the plant. The large, main corm is referred to as "the mother." It has smaller side buds which are called "oha," "keikis," or "babies." Both the mother corm and the oha are used for making poi.

"Waterhead" is the place where the stream is dammed and part of its water is diverted into an "auwai" or ditch. Without a constant flow of fresh water, wetland taro cannot be grown.

In harvesting, a taro "boat" or "box" is often used in the patch to hold the pulled taro plants. Farmers market their taro in either 80 or 100-pound bags. Most farmers do not weigh their taro bags. Instead, they use three plastic five-gallon cans full of taro for an 80-pound bag and four cans for a 100-pound bag. The prices are quoted either per bag or per pound.

"Paraquat" is an herbicide used to kill the weeds on the taro patch banks. "Captan" is a fungicide.

Interviewees often use these words to indicate direction in relation to the valley: "Down side" means toward the ocean. "Upper valley" or "up side" means inland. "Waimanu side" means the side of the valley closest to Waimanu and "Kukuihaele side" means toward Kukuihaele. "Up top" and "up the pali" mean outside of the valley on the Kukuihaele side.

Separate areas within Waipio are Napoopoo, Kunaka and Kaau. Napoopoo was the hub of the former community (see map).

How To Use the Transcripts

Familiarity with the above terms will be helpful when reading the transcripts. It would also be useful to read the following appendices:

--Chronology of events relevant to Waipio, taro and poi which was compiled before interviewing began; includes a bibliography.

--Glossary of major people mentioned in the interviews and their interrelationships. Many Waipio and Kukuihaele people are related by blood and/or marriage. Knowledge of kinship relations is necessary for understanding the transcripts and can shed light on the social relationships of the valley people.

--Questionnaire used by the interviewer as a guide.

--Two maps of Waipio. One showing the whole valley in relation to Waimanu Valley and Kukuihaele. Another showing the taro farms, homes, and landmarks in Waipio that interviewees often mention.

--Table of taro acreage in Hawaii by island, 1946-1972.

--Table of Waipio School enrollment, 1924-1945.

--Photos section with pictures of each interviewee and some historical and recent photos of Waipio.

There is a glossary of all foreign words used (underlined in transcripts). With the exception of the words hoe hana and sailor moku, "pidgin" English words are not underlined. In addition, a list of interviewees by age, sex, and occupation and a detailed subject index are included in these volumes.

A biographical summary precedes each interviewee's transcript. The tape number on each transcript corresponds to the number of the cassette tape from which the interview was transcribed.

All interviewees were encouraged to read their transcripts and make any deletions or additions they considered necessary before signing the following legal release:

> In order to preserve and make available the history of Hawaii for present and future generations, I hereby give and grant to the University of Hawaii Ethnic Studies Oral History Project as a donation for such scholarly and educational purposes as the Project Director shall determine, all my rights, title, and interest to the following: Tapes and edited transcripts of interviews recorded on (date), Biographical Data Sheet dated _____, and Notes of untaped interviews dated _____.

The majority of the transcripts are almost verbatim from the actual taped interviews. Minor editing was done by the ESOHP staff to make the transcripts easier to read. Staff additions are in brackets [ ]. The staff made no changes which compromise the flavor and authenticity of the interviews.

In a few cases certain parts of the transcripts were omitted and the corresponding portions of tape erased at interviewee request. A few other interviewees made grammatical or syntactic changes in their transcripts. Several interviewees attached additions or explanations. These changes have been incorporated into the final transcript. Interviewee additions are in parentheses ( ).

These transcripts represent the statements which the interviewees wish to leave for the public record. The transcripts are available at:

Oahu
Hawaii State Library
Kaimuki Regional Library
Kaneohe Regional Library
Pearl City Regional Library
University of Hawaii at Manoa
  Hamilton Library
  Ethnic Studies Program
Honolulu Community College Library
Kapiolani Community College Library
Leeward Community College Library
Windward Community College Library
Hawaii State Archives
Hawaii Foundation for History and the Humanities
Ethnic Studies Oral History Project

Hawaii
Hawaii Public Library
Honokaa Community Library
Hawaii Community College Library
Hilo College Library
Kona Community Library

Kauai
Kauai Regional Library
Kauai Community College Library

Lanai
Lanai Community Library

Maui
Maui Regional Library
Maui Community College Library

Molokai
Molokai Community Library

In addition to the tapes and transcripts, a 25-minute slide-tape presentation is available to schools, organizations, and the general public. The slide show includes historic photographs, present day photographs of Waipio and excerpts from the oral history interviews.

The staff of the Ethnic Studies Oral History Project believes that understanding the contributions of Hawaii's multi-ethnic working people will foster within individuals a positive ethnic identity and an appreciation of the proud heritage of all Hawaii's people. We look forward to continuing the work of recording, developing, and popularizing the people's history of Hawaii.

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Honolulu, Hawaii
December 1978

WAIPI'O: MĀNO WAI

AN ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Volume II

ETHNIC STUDIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

ETHNIC STUDIES PROGRAM
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, MANOA

December 1978